THE NOTEBOOKS OF GIOVANNI SIMONE MAYR

By John S. Allitt

It is the aim of the Society's Journal to translate the writings of Mayr which are indispensable for understanding not only Donizetti's musical and human outlook, but also for gaining insight into an age. The next issue will publish in translation Mayr's all-important thoughts on instrumentation. The original text has already been made available by Arrigo Gazzaniga in the Rivista Musicale Italiana 1973 number, I.

Here we are presenting for the first time a selection of thoughts and maxims. Mayr condensed the books he considered necessary for teaching; he wrote down thoughts, ideas, and notes from all sorts of sources on music, religion and life. He wrote freely in Italian, German, French and English. He may quote a poem by William Collins or a newspaper reporting the state of music in Spain or Russia. Sometimes he wrote whole sections on a subject, sometimes he just noted a few thoughts.

It is important to remember that Mayr was a devout Catholic and a Platonist. He subscribed to the view that music was the source of the Creation. He believed the rules of harmony echoed the deepest mysteries of life, and thus he considered harmony to depend on a sacred arithmetic. He was in this sense a Pythagorian; for example, he devoted a considerable amount of time studying the effect of music over humans and animals.

Mayr realised he had caused a revolution in instrumentation but was disturbed by the course Western Civilization was taking. He lamented the debility of religion in his own day and foresaw the rapid decline of the metaphysical

foundations upon which Western music was founded.

The greater number of the following quotations are taken from Donizetti and the Tradition of Romantic Love by John S. Allitt.

* The Ancients did not place Parnassus in a fertile plain but on the summit of a steep mountain, and to climb up there needs time and effort.

* Simplicity is that which has beauty in the arts, be it in theory or in practice. It is however, the hardest thing to find.

* That which is simple is of necessity profound.

* I am of the opinion that one must place the child destined for the art of imagination at the foothills of the mountains, so as to behold the space of that mysterious distance which will draw at an early age unforgettable visions which will one day render him famous in his art.

* The most beautiful gift is that which renders strength to one's creative genius.

* The most precious things have need of time's sanction for them to mature and be appreciated.

* Every artist has a limited round of ideas, in which he moves in a more or less large periphery.

* Music - the art of painting with appreciable sounds the emotions in a way that the affections of whosoever is listening give birth to joy and delight.

* The study of works of the past procures various advantages. It often presents the artist with new material, for the forgotten past often becomes renewed. It helps him to acquire a clear idea of his own work. It gives a sense of purpose, understanding, diligence and continuity. It concentrates his talent and skill in a determined circle of purpose. These thoughts are of double importance in the age of the popular arts. An age which leaves the artist to run freely wherever and however he pleases. An age which permits him to use all his beautiful gifts of nature for the moment, without form, with the only aim of purchasing in the moment and only for the moment of effect.

* Melody is to music as thought is to conversation.

* Music is like painting with its colours and shades.

* Dies Irae - Mozart, emotional and therefore for the anima - Cherubini, full of calculated devises, therefore for the animus. However neither one or the other lacks in either composition. e.g. Cherubini - Pie Jesu.

* A song must be like a proverb, written in such a way so that it passes into the mouth of all; it will be remembered when it is as true and as penetrating as a proverb.

* (In the terzetto from L'esule di Roma, Donizetti) has found unity of taste and dramatic force, presenting a perfect amalgam of melody and declamation. (Anna Bolena, an opera) full of beauty of the first order.

* It is certain that music speaks to the Imagination as well as to the Senses. Indeed, music reaches the Heart through the Senses, imitating Nature, thus depicting, reasoning and expressing the different passions of the soul together with various sensations. This it achieves in its own particular way.

* Music has in itself the Sublime. It consists in the strength of harmony and melody which may elevate, even rape the soul. Such a state comes about through the strictest union of those three elements (Greatness, Nobility, and Magnificence), with natural clarity of thought and musical sensitivity. Melody and the lively and beautiful cycle of flowing melodies must then correspond to and equal the expression of the words dressed up with the music.

* Music is lost, wrote Benedette Marcello in 1704, a man endowed with much musical genius and whose compositions contradict his opinion. He did not realise that he himself was aiding the birth of dramatic music, whilst he was preaching a sermon on the death of the arts. Music is dying signed Rameau, without realizing what was happening in his own country, regardless of his efforts.... music is lost, music is dying; such comments signify nothing more than the fact that music has changed form.

* (If composers of religious music) would study (Palestrina's) sublime example they would regain the seriousness, strength and depth which should be theirs by nature. All the bizarre modes which are today so badly adapted to sacred texts would soon be abolished... They would rediscover

that supremely difficult simplicity which hand in hand with the majesty and nobility demanded by the text, which communes with God and which attempts to celebrate His Glory and Incomprehensible Might, besides imploring his Mercy and Goodness.

* The genuine and ancient melodies of Gregorian Chant are indeed beyond imitation. We may copy them, adapt them, heaven knows how, to other words, but to compose new ones as worthy as the ancient ones is impossible.....without doubt the melodies of hymns are the oldest and sincerest melodies we know.

* He explained to his students with clarity, with love and with a sense of humour how a man might understand himself to be a friend of knowledge...

* The light of the original flame is always stronger than the light of the reflection.

* The more capable you will become, the fuller will be your pleasures.

* Satire is the vengeance of virtue.

* Love of self hides ourselves from ourselves, and diminishes all our short-comings. We live with them, like the smells we carry about with ourselves, we do not smell them any longer and they upset only those around us.

* He who would live with the world, must also give up something to the world.

* Art is eternal like the ever-conceiving matrix of the universe. Art was born from the moment of the first man's pulse

beat, summoning him to worship his Creator.

* It is said, the story of a people's poetry is their nation's history. One might add, it is the same matter with music and the other arts.

* The Age in which one begins to teach art is that of its decadence....Aristotle gave his precepts for the writing of tragedies when no living poet was capable of writing a tragedy.

* '..que tout changement dans la musique annonce un changement dans les moeurs.' Examining with a philosophical ear the character of each centry's music and the changes it was subjected to, one will remark that the nation's character has changed in political and religious matters.

* The general state not only in literature but also in music seems to have taken on some of the following characteristics:

  1. A reasoned hatred of all rules and of all ideas of control, suitability, or order in theory.

  2. A systemized imitation of the ugly and the second rate.

  3. Prevalence for the bizarre, the monstrous, the obscure, be it in ideas or in sentiment.

  4. The same with form. Form is a reflection of moral and intellectual dispositions. Does this imply a premature disorder? We witness much talk, calculated mannerisms, forced combinations, uncontrolled neologisms,

all of which are signs of decadence and barbarity.

* For some time now we have been invaded by 'freedom of expression'. Ah! This universal freedom which makes us equal with the most abject slaves in the world, each one wishing to command in his way, who will obey?

* Once the good taste of he who executes strays, so does that of he who passes judgement.

* Our century does not sleep, except in the field of religious thought.

* When prayer has become a source of effect on the stage, being presented without object, without dignity and out of place.... it is thus all becomes profaned.

* True Catholicism, which uplifts the soul to contemplate the Sublime, was always in the past united to the arts and gave life, splendour, and consciousness.

* True religion is poetry itself. It is only through religion that it is possible for there to be poetry. It is thus we are clearly shown the plight of our times, for the religious spirit is disappearing. Therefore, so will, not only poetry, but also all teaching and preparation, together with the enjoyment in the production of poetic activities.

* It is necessary to have harmony between the Spirit and the Heart, that is to say, to have music in one's actions. Morality teaches the way in which we must put

matters in agreement, so that peace and harmony of virtue is the result. Only in such a way, emanate those concepts which are worthy to echo the praises of God.

* Time consumes man and man consumes time.

* Our life is perhaps like a sad desert in which neither flowers nor trees grow.

* It was a penetrating light which shone: it was a reflection of the nearness of immortality. It was like a fleeting shadow thrown in a solitary place caused by the flight of a bird through the sky. The thought comes back to the mind, like recalling one's first love.

* It has even been granted to me to sing the praises of the Lord - but oh! with a sound far too minute and a plectrum far too small.....Oh! if only I had the power to express worthily here and elsewhere my gratefulness, then the profound feeling moving in my soul and the weakness impeding my lips would cease, in favour of burning and living sounds... ...

